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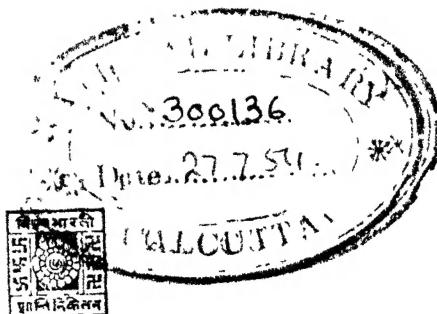
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# THE FUNCTION OF A LIBRARY

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Most libraries are possessed with the passion for accumulation. Three-quarters of their books do not come into use ; their overgrown proportion even thrusts into a corner the specially selected few that are meant for being actually used. In our popular parlance, the man of large riches is called a great man. When a millionaire comes into a gathering, they vie to do him honour—an honour not dependent on what he has to give, but merely on what he has. Much in the same way, the bigness of a library is estimated by the number of its volumes. The facilities offered for their use, that should have been its glory, are not deemed necessary for its pride.

The words that are owned by our language have two different repositories: one is the dictionary, the other is its literature. It is useful to collect all the known words in a comprehensive dictionary, though comparatively but few of them are actually current. On the other hand, the range of words found in literature—which are living and therefore not one of which can be spared—is ever so much less. And yet it has to

be admitted that the value of literature is more than that of the dictionary.

The same truth applies to the library. That part of its contents which is for the purpose of extensive accumulation has its usefulness, but the other part which is for constant and multifarious use gives it its significance. The average librarian, however, rarely takes thought or trouble to bring the largest number of books to the utmost use, because it is always easier to overwhelm the public mind with the mere display of quantitative abundance.

In order to bring a library into the fullest use, it is necessary that its contents should be clearly and specifically brought to notice, otherwise it is difficult for the ordinary man to find his way about them, and the library is left as a city of vast accommodation that lacks sufficient means of communication. Those who frequent libraries on some special quest of their own may manage to make a track for themselves by dint of the urgency of their particular pursuit. But the library itself should recognize its share of responsibility in the matter. Because it has the books, it is incumbent on the library to get them read, for then alone is it justified. It is not enough that it

passively permits visitors: its invitation should be active. For, as the Sanskrit proverb tells us: *tannashtam yannadiyate*, that which is not given is wasted.

The usual thing is for a library to say: Here is my catalogue, come and select for yourself. But in the usual catalogue there is no introduction, no invitation, no spirit of welcome. That library alone can be called hospitable, which shows an eagerness to invite readers to the feast at its disposal. It is such hospitality that makes a library big, not its size. That the readers make the library is not the whole truth; the library likewise makes the readers.

If this truth is kept in view, we at once realize what a great function is that of the librarian. His duty does not end with the acquisition, classification and care-taking of the volumes in his charge. In other words, it is not exhausted by mere multiplication and division; he must have a proper understanding of his books as well. If a library is too big, it becomes practically impossible for the librarian adequately to acquire such true understanding. That is why I feel that the big library can but function as a store-house, and only the small one serve as a refectory to

furnish the wherewithal for daily sustenance and enjoyment.

My idea of a small library is one that keeps books on every subject, but only select books, not one of which is there merely as an offering of worship to Number, but each one of which stands on its own merits ; where the librarian is a true devotee, devoid of ulterior seeking, free from pride in the mere loading of shelves, capable of discriminate rejection. A library, in short, which makes just enough provision that can be placed before its guests for their delectation, with a librarian who has the qualities of a host, not a store-keeper.

Consider, for instance, the case of a library which takes in a number of periodicals published at home and abroad. If some one on the staff made it his duty regularly to compile a list of the specially interesting articles and hang it up in a conspicuous place, would that not immensely increase the chances of their being read? As it is, three-fourths of these remain unopened, encumbering space and burdening the shelves as they keep on accumulating. The same is the case with new books. Very few librarians attempt to acquaint themselves, much less their

constituents, with the contents. Yet is it not obvious that the wealth they have to offer should be made known as soon as new books come to hand?

Made known to whom? In each case to a special circle of readers. Every library should have as its indispensable limbs such special circles of readers. These alone can give it life. The worth of a librarian I would gauge by his power of attracting and looking after such circles, of acting as the intermediary for an intimacy of relationship between reader and library. That is to say, on him is cast the burden not only of the books, but of their readers as well, and in the maintaining of both is the test of his efficiency, of the proper discharge of his trust.

Even as to the books themselves, the librarian's duty should not be confined to those that he can collect in his own library, but he must also keep himself acquainted with all those others that are published from time to time, subject by subject. For the purposes of our school at Santiniketan, for example, we have to keep ourselves in touch with all the publications intended for children, so as to be able to make our selection. Every library should assist in work of this kind. This

they could do by keeping up-to-date lists of books on different subjects, as they come out and gain reputation. If it became known that a particular library was endeavouring to discharge this duty, I am sure that the publishers would be glad to cooperate by furnishing it with lists of their publications, together with a résumé of their contents.

In conclusion it is my submission to the All-India Library Conference that it should consider the question of preparing and circulating such quarterly, half-yearly or at least annual list, from which the main features of the best new books in the English language, scientific, literary and historical, may be gathered. If it be the object of this Conference to stimulate the founding and growth of libraries all over the country, then such object can be best promoted by thus affording a guide to the books that should be procured : incidentally also thereby assisting the libraries in what should be their main work—not the mere procuring and keeping of books, but actively acquainting their constituents with and interesting them in their contents.

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